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# The Failure of the University

*If Pascal had envisaged only some great profit, or if he had even been moved by the desire for glory alone, I cannot believe that he would have been able to marshal, as he did, all the powers of his intelligence in order better to discover the most hidden secrets of the Creator. When I see him tear his soul, as it were, from the midst of life's cares in order to attach it exclusively to this study and, prematurely breaking the bonds which keep it in the body, die of old age before forty, I am struck dumb, and I understand that it is no ordinary cause which can produce such extraordinary efforts.*

*The future will prove if these passions, so rare and so fecund, are born and develop so easily in the midst of democratic societies as in the bosom of aristocracies. I, for my part, avow that I find it hard to believe.*

Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, i, 10.

TOCQUEVILLE, democracy's great friend and admirer, reminds us in this passage of the Platonic tripartite division of the soul—desire, spiritedness, and reason. According to that understanding of human psychology, each of these parts provides its specific motivation to action and has its own proper end. Desire seeks preservation and comfort; spiritedness, honor, particularly in politics; and reason, knowledge for its own sake, or the contemplation of being. The educated man is the one in whom each of these three elements has developed properly and fully and in whom they are most harmoniously balanced, particularly with respect to their self-evident order of rank. Now in Tocqueville's analysis, as in Plato's, different regimes tend to encourage the flourishing of one part of the soul at the expense of the others. They do so by giving power to men whose dominant motive derives from one of those parts and who by their authoritative position determine public education and the respectable objects of aspiration. The character of public life thus established reinforces, in turn, the tendencies of the citizens on whom the regime is based. A world is constituted with horizons that exclude or distort the other alternatives in such a way that they no longer come to sight as real alternatives. Higher education, to the extent that its intention is to cultivate man simply and not to make the man suitable to this time or place, must counterpoise the prevailing intellectual vice of the regime and preserve what it tends to neglect.

Democracy, or the egalitarian regime, must, according to Tocqueville, perforce have utility as its primary motive: it is founded on the rule of all, and the vital desires and the fear of death are shared by all—as opposed to the desires for glory and pure knowledge which are rare. This devotion to utility is particularly true of modern democracies, the theory of which was precisely to encourage the self-regarding passions as a sure means to political consensus. Disinterested love of the

truth is particularly threatened in democracy. The motives of honor and glory which usually characterize aristocracy are not in themselves any more akin to the love of truth than is utility, but they free men from the concern for preservation and hence from the necessary attachment to a mercenary use of the mind. Aristocrats are more inclined to admire—perhaps in a frivolous way, but one which can be used to the profit of the theoretical—beautiful and useless things. A Pascal is, therefore, more a product of such a society and more likely to find a home within it. Thus, in addition to the other reasons adduced, the intellectual life in a democracy is profoundly influenced by the absence of a truly leisured class which would patronize and protect it from the demands of the market.

In modern democracies the universities have taken the place of such a class and attempted to provide a basis for the cultivation of the theoretical life which finds only thin soil elsewhere in the society. Their success would have enabled democracy to combine the advantages of equal justice with the advantages of the peaks of speculation. For the sake of the regime, it had to resist the regime's tendency to use everything for its immediate ends. And the regime has powerful weapons in money, public opinion and, above all, the appearance of moral principle.

In the last years we have witnessed the failure of the university. It has become incorporated into the system of ideas and goals of the society around it. The multiversity, with its dedication to the useful as defined by society's demands, has joined hands with what appeared to be its enemy, the passion for commitment and sweeping social change which was the child of the late sixties. Now quietly they work together, not because the flood tide has receded, but because it has swept away what obstructed it. The university, to the extent it represented the theoretical life, is more a memory than a reality.

Very simply put, young Americans no longer like to read, and they do not do so. There are no fundamental books which form them, through which they see the world and educate their vision. To the extent they use books, it is because school requires them to do so, or it is for the sake of information. Books are not a source of pleasure, nor would many students imagine that old books could contain the answers to the problems that most concern them. The university does not represent a community the bonds of which are constituted by a shared literary heritage, and friendships are not formed by the common study of the important issues.

Professors Werner J. Dannhauser and L. Pearce Williams at Cornell University posed this question to that institution's president:

> If we prove to you that an Arts and Sciences student can now receive a B.A. degree at Cornell, and thus be presumed to have acquired a liberal education, without having been required to read a line of Plato, the Bible, Shakespeare, Marx or Einstein, would you consider this to be evidence that there is a crisis in education at Cornell?

An answer was never received. It is not known whether this president, or other university presidents, would regard this situation as an educational problem. But that such university careers are possible, and even common, is a fact. No longer does the university have a content or a focus. It has accommodated itself to all demands and tastes for too long. This is the legacy of a decade of academic upheaval. What promised to be a great new openness, a liberation from artificial constraints, has resulted in emptiness.

To say the same thing in a different way, the window which opened out onto Europe has been closed. American intellectual life was always in tutelage to that of Europe. There was not much here to inspire the best minds. To the extent that we

had spiritual substance, it was derivative from the great tradition which had its origins in Europe and which was still in some measure alive there. The longing to experience the heights and depths of the soul always led toward Europe—its art, its music, its literature, its science, and its philosophy. It was a priceless advantage to have in our midst institutions which could provide us access to a beauty and a freedom of the mind which our immediate surroundings did not inspire. One of America's greatest virtues was its openness to the cultivation of disciplines which were in some measure alien to its way of life and which could help to enrich or correct it. In this way we could hope to have the best of both worlds.

But isolationism has always been one of our instincts. Going a-whoring after foreign gods was not a thing to be easily tolerated when America had its problems to be looked after. Moreover, there seemed to be a whiff of disloyalty to egalitarian principles about the man whose tastes were so different from those of the ruling majority. The schools and universities, however, more or less successfully resisted the pressure to conform, because almost their entire curriculum consisted of European things and there would have been little left to their domain if they assimilated to the public taste, and because the teachers and professors had a profound inner conviction of the importance of what they taught. Now neither of these motives for resistance has anything like the same force it once exerted.

Philosophy and liberal studies, in general, require the most careful attention to what are frequently called the great books. This is because they are expressions of teachers such as we are not likely to encounter in person, because in them we find the arguments for what we take for granted without reflection, and because they are the sources for forgotten alternatives. They make it possible for us to carry on our discussion on a high level. Thus, liberal education consists largely in the painstaking study of these books. This study requires long and arduous training, for these books are not immediately accessible to us. Without such a training, an impoverishment of our intellectual discourse necessarily results. One need only look at academic philosophy and the social sciences to see how irrelevant the tradition has become to them. They suppose they have found new methods in the light of which the older teachings appear primitive.

Formerly certain fundamental books—most notably, but not only, the Bible—provided a spiritual common ground for society at large. The universities were dedicated to profounder reflection on that spiritual common ground. That profounder reflection, while separating the universities from the society, also linked them to it. Most recently the Bible, Shakespeare, and the Declaration of Independence (and, along with it, the *Federalist*) have disappeared from public life, and a parallel development has taken place within the university. The university, if it is to play a public role, can no longer do so as the guardian and sublimator of the common concerns or as the thoughtful conscience of public practice. Its link to society appears to consist only in serving its wishes.

This loss of the tradition was explained by Tocqueville as a result of what he called the philosophic method of the Americans. Such a method consists primarily in the rejection of all authority. Every man's reason is taken to be sufficient to determine all questions. Whatever the advantages of this method—and they are many—it is fatal to tradition. As Tocqueville put it, tradition is nothing more than information for the democratic man. It is not of the essence of the classic tradition to be authoritative, but a certain authoritative status guarantees its perpetuation with men who do not see its rational merits and in times when it is untimely. Scholastics took

Aristotle too much as writ rather than as question or problem, but he was read and studied. Our age, in agreement with Aristotle that reason is the ultimate test, no longer reads Aristotle because we do not see his reasons. Hardly any thought of the past has any continuing public significance in our country, so that if the universities were to act as the preservers of the tradition, they would have to resist the tide, insist on studies which go against the grain, appear to be troglodytic and irrelevant. This they no longer have the will to do.

Young Americans surely still want to visit Europe, but the desire is no longer powerful, nor is its object the discovery of unknown worlds, the initiation into the mysteries. Going to Europe, just as going to college, is not anticipated as a transforming experience, an education, a new casting of heart and mind. The end of our inner subservience to Europe is, undoubtedly, partly just the belated coming to awareness that Europe is no longer what it was either politically or intellectually, that its present cannot make particular claims to be anything different or admirable beyond what is available here. Locke, in describing the precivilized condition of man, compares it to America prior to European settlement. "Thus in the beginning all the world was America." And that is also the case in the end. What Europe offers is only reminiscences of another world. Our situation is not unlike Madame Bovary's when, wide eyed and full of foolish awe, she was invited to a ball at the castle of decayed, postrevolutionary aristocrats.

> [At the dinner] at the head of the table, alone among all of these women, bent over his full plate with his napkin knotted around his neck like a child, an old man ate, letting drops of gravy trickle from his mouth. He had bloodshot eyes and wore a little pigtail fastened with a black ribbon. It was the Marquis' father-in-law, the old Duc de Laverdière, the former favorite of the Comte d'Artois at the time of the hunts at the Vaudreuil home of the Marquis de Conflans, and who had been, it was said, the lover of Queen Marie-Antoinette between M. de Coigny and M. de Lauzun. He had led a wild life of debauch, full of duels, wagers, abducted women, had devoured his fortune and terrified his whole family. A domestic, behind his chair, speaking loudly into his ear, named the dishes for him to which he pointed while stuttering. And constantly Emma's eyes, of their own accord, returned to this old man with drooping lips as to something extraordinary and august. He had lived at court and slept in the bed of queens.

Flaubert by means of this old man gives us a double perspective on the *ancien régime*—its present reality and what it can mean to someone with a bit of imagination. The former perspective does not exhaust the significance of the object. We could perhaps do with a bit of Emma's imagination in our view of Europe.

It is, however, not only the factual state of Europe which is the cause of our disenchantment with its books. There is also much positive doctrinairism behind it. The new egalitarianism, the defection of the intellectuals to populism or know-nothingism, found itself in harmony with the multiversity. Both believe that each student should express his unique self and find his own interests. All disciplines are equal as are all ways of life. "Doing one's own thing" is today still the motto, with the proviso that one must reluctantly also learn a trade in order to make a living (now that students have been reminded that survival is an imperative for them, too). So far as the "liberal" side of the university is concerned, it is still anything goes, without anyone's having much of an idea about what one might do. There is much lamentation about the prevailing conservatism and the abandonment of the innovative programs of the late sixties. But those programs never had any content. They were just structures for the expression of freedom or intense efforts to provide a ground for relaxation. They enjoyed a momentary vogue, for few intelligent students could

resist the promises of liberation from meaningless and irrelevant requirements and the opportunity to relate knowledge to life. Aside from the programs which were intended to answer specific political demands, however, the rest was a wasteland. Disappointment and boredom were the predictable consequences of the wave of university reforms which swept the nation, for they were demagogic and full of empty rhetoric. The rhetoric is still around, and disappointment has not led to return, but to apathy. Until the middle fifties, there was, in a conventional and perhaps formulaic way, agreement about the disciplines that constituted the core of the university. The immense growth of the university which then occurred effaced its visage. The addition of new disciplines and within the old disciplines the addition of new subdisciplines destroyed all agreement about the common end. Also, what it meant to be a professor altered radically. But this was not at the time perceived as a problem because growth offered something for everyone, and there was no thought about what would happen if that growth were to cease. The academic disorders of the sixties evoked reforms intended to conciliate student wishes rather than to serve their needs. And it also became evident that many professors had come to doubt the value of what they taught. These developments led to a further erosion of agreement about the university's vocation.

Now, with money in short supply, there is retrenchment without an "order of priorities" or any view of what should be cut out—just drift and random choice as circumstance dictates. Above all, there are the doldrums. Students are nostalgic for the excitement of the late sixties when something was really going on. The only thing they can find to look up to is the memory of the most anti-intellectual moment in the history of universities, one at which, however, there was a great deal of publicity and the universities were in the vanguard of popular culture. It is true that quiet now prevails and that students are studying again. But it is not the liberal studies that they are studying. We have nothing to offer them on that score. In order to do so, we would have to agree on the most important questions for a human life and the ways to ask them.

But it is in the nature of man to desire clarity about the highest ends, no matter how great the effort to obscure the fact that there are such ends, that they are problems, and that there is a way to study them. In my teaching I have found that the segment of Tocqueville devoted to the intellectual life of the Americans, from which my beginning quote on Pascal is drawn, is particularly moving for students—if their attention is forcibly drawn to it. At first they pass over it lightly, for Tocqueville seems to be describing a primitive America which is strictly a thing of the past. The effect of these passages is not unlike that of Swift's account of his first encounter with the Yahoos. He gives a description of them akin to a scientist's observation of a nasty creature he is the first to discover. Then, suddenly it dawns on us that the nasty creature is us as we look to an outsider. Once Tocqueville's account has pierced the deceptive veneer of contemporary culture, the student has a painful yet exhilarating moment of self-awareness. No one wishes to be unaware of the good things one could possibly enjoy. Although Tocqueville engenders a certain self-contempt, he also opens a prospect of self-improvement. The student realizes that Tocqueville's account is not a window but a mirror and that all the tendencies Tocqueville describes have been exacerbated in recent years. Tradition has decayed; the enslavement to public opinion has increased; forms have disappeared; literature has difficulty finding elevating subject matters in our lives and a discriminating audience; there is a literary mercantilism; our penchant for general ideas has in-

creased because our experience and study do not provide us with a rich concrete consciousness; our social sciences tend ever more to see deterministic explanations of human action, for we have little faith in the power of individual freedom in a mass egalitarian society; there is little or no inspiring political rhetoric, so we must be led by force or interest. And, above all, philosophy is not only not practiced, its very possibility is denied. It just has no place in our life, in the way, for example, chemistry has. Because we no longer have the European university as the standard against which to judge ourselves, we can delude ourselves about our condition, and we give way more and more to our fundamental inclinations.

Reading Tocqueville serves not only the function of self-awareness, but also that of making students realize that an old book can be of use, thereby giving them the habit of reading. Moreover, they see in Tocqueville an example of a kind of man they do not know, and some are charmed by his grace, his delicacy, and his love of justice. He not only poses the problem of our intellectual life, he himself as a model is part of a solution. They are intrigued by trying to figure out how he attained a standpoint from which he could see us so clearly, and they are aware that they must do something similar. The problem of liberal education is far from being an insuperable one. It is just that universities are not inclined to do anything about it. One can perhaps see this best when one reads that Tocqueville believed that the most efficacious way to compensate for the intellectual failings of democratic man was to study the Greek and Roman authors. Where are they now?

Up to now I have been discussing what has not been going on in universities. Now I must turn to what has been going on. It can all perhaps be summed up in an anecdote. Recently I visited a highly respected liberal arts college in New England. In order to get to my room at the faculty club I had to pass through a conference chamber in which the president, deans, and department chairmen were meeting. I hurried by, but could not help hearing one sentence uttered by the president: "History, on the other hand, might appear to be male chauvinist." These men—or persons—were doing what most university administrators are doing. They were engaged in rectifying unequal treatment, real or alleged, of equal persons—an endeavor which has exhausted the moral and intellectual energies of the university. Although the university may have nothing to teach, it is going to be taught by faculties recruited equally to all students equally admitted. The universities are quiet. The frenzy which upset us all so much has passed. But it was not a passing fad as was swallowing goldfish or streaking. The old world was overthrown by it, and the essential thrust of the movement has become incorporated into the life-giving principles of the university. What we are witnessing is the routinization or bureaucratization of the radical egalitarianism which was the essence of the student demands of the sixties. Our current calm is at least in part due to the fact that the former dissidents now really constitute the establishment.

The egalitarian effervescence of which I am speaking was, whatever the particular causes espoused, the only motive and the only goal of what took place in the last years. It had, in part, the intention of extending prevailing principles of egalitarian justice to areas where their application had been hindered, particularly in relation to blacks and women. This was perfectly in keeping with both the spirit of the regime and what is proper to the university. But there was also a new and powerful element of thought which insisted on movement from equality of opportunity to factual equality—either by way of denying that there are any relevant in-

equalities or by way of using government, the university, or genetics to overcome them. Connected with this new radical egalitarianism in the university were the abandonment of requirements, the demand for student participation in all functions of the university, the evaluation of professors by students, sex-counseling, the renouncing of standards because they encourage discrimination and unhealthy competition, a continuing inflation of grades, concentration on teaching rather than scholarship, open admissions, the introduction of new programs to fit every wish, and quotas in the admission of students and the hiring of faculty. It is questionable whether a university can pursue its proper end if it must be engaged in the fight against social inequality. But much more was being demanded of it. There was, and is, an opinion abroad that natural inequalities are as offensive as social or conventional ones, and that it is the business of the university to correct the former as well as the latter. Thus the university must declare a war on nature as well as society in the name of equality.

The intellectual effects of this determination on the part of universities are overwhelming. In the first place, equality has to become a kind of religion, doubts about which in thought, not to speak of deeds, cause pangs of conscience. It becomes impossible to reflect on the possibility that there might be a hierarchy of human types and pursuits and that it is part of the university's task and a duty of justice to encourage and cultivate some of these types and pursuits more than others. Any research, however dispassionate, which might tend to reveal differences among nations, races, or sexes which are counter to the prevailing dogma is risky indeed to the scholar. One must be circumspect in order not to appear to dissent on these great issues. Thus a whole range of thought about the alternatives for man has vanished. Timidity about fundamental issues is the order of the day.

One can see where the power lies by the things of which men most fear being accused. The charges that carry weight with the tribunal of university public opinion today are racism, sexism, and elitism, taking the place of older charges like atheism or Communism. That these are, in varying degrees, nasty dispositions cannot be doubted. But they are difficult to define. And it is as difficult to prove that a man possesses them as it is to prove that a man does not believe in God. Almost no one these days would admit to any one of them. But the air is rife with accusations. Most want to be considered in the vanguard of the fight against racism, sexism, and elitism; all wish to avoid being suspected of favoring them. Therefore, there is a fertile field for the flourishing of *tartuferie* and McCarthyism of the left. Racial, feminist, and egalitarian extremists can claim to represent the orthodoxy and promote unreasonable policies.

Take the case of women's liberation, for example. How many professors would dare to make serious investigations concerning psychic differentiations between men and women or to suggest different ways of life and education as appropriate to them? All to the contrary, there is a witch-hunt going on to root out sexism in science, philosophy, and the literary tradition. Since it is now accepted that male chauvinism dominated most of the past, it is impossible to take, for example, Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloise* as anything better than a particularly prejudiced perspective on men and women and their relations. It must either be expunged, held up to ridicule, or treated as a historical curiosity. Since almost none of the classic works of any kind can be taken to support the women's liberation movement, we have one more reason for abandoning the study of the tradition, for we are now on a higher moral and intellectual plateau. The new principles do not find support

in the old literature so it cannot be a source of inspiration. And, for the moment, the movement has not generated a literature of a comparable quality. In the name of new truths one must, temporarily at least, accept thinner souls. And the university resounds with unceasing propaganda in order to do away with prejudices. Our horizons, in universities of all places, are purposely narrowed in order to avoid possibilities unpalatable to a party. A similar story can be told about the intellectual effects of the war against racism and elitism. It is hardly an atmosphere which promotes serious discussion or contemplation of the only available examples of greatness which we possess. Our heritage is made both dangerous and contemptible. There is an utter disproportion between our intellectual substance and the political and moral reality which engages the students.

With these forces at work, university administrators, partly prodded by HEW, spend their time responding to them. There is no academic reason for what they propose, although feeble justifications are attempted. In reality the concentration is not on the quality of the professor or the student, but on the category he comes from; it follows that the immanent demands of the subject matter must be sacrificed to what this kind of teacher can teach and this kind of learner can learn. Affirmative action is but one example among many of what has absorbed university life. University administrations are not ashamed to announce that almost all of their appointments will be made from minorities or women. Without discussing what such policies do to real equality of opportunity and fairness, their effect on the intellectual standards of the disciplines is evident. And worst of all, such policies engender a hypocrisy which is rotting the moral core of the university, the place where truth is supposed to be the first of all concerns. We are treated to assertions that appointments are made on merit, when everyone knows that a member of a minority or a woman is a hot academic commodity and that quality is of secondary importance. Departments just must have them—to show them off to HEW, to radical constituencies, to the press. We are told that open admissions have not damaged academic standards, without being provided with the criteria for such judgments and when there are good reasons to think the opposite is the case. We are assured that the black and women's studies programs are great successes, whereas one finds that they are actually neither clear about what they are doing nor satisfying the very constituencies for which they were established. We are told that reverse discrimination is not practiced (for example, whites excluded from university-owned housing units), when it is clear to all the world this is not the case. We are told that old testing methods were not adequate—which is probably true—but it is also evident that this is asserted only to remove exclusive standards and that no alternative standards are sought. And in all this, to repeat, not a serious thought is given to education.

The students are bored—bored because they have already in high school enjoyed the freedoms young people used to look forward to in college, bored because they have been filled with the ideology which denigrates the university as a tool of the establishment and a passport to success, bored because the old, silly, but exciting snobbism has disappeared, bored because they must prepare for careers which they know to be necessary but which they despise, and, above all, bored because the university offers them no inspiration, no vision of a higher motive for life or of vast new worlds.

This is not a happy time for the university, nor one of which we university men can be very proud. Liberal arts is a decaying rump of the university with no projects

for the future. There are too many students who do not care and too many professors with too little scholarship. The next step for the latter is unionization, which will add another hypocrisy about standards while covering the real concern for job security. This unionization will be just a further step in reducing the professor to the level of the high-school teacher. Liberal arts education would today have a hard time defending its *raison d'être* before a tribunal of the wise. In one way the solution is simple. The students are starving for spiritual nourishment, and it is right under our noses, where it always was. But no one who has any power will look to it, and the special interests would oppose it with might and main. The achievement of a liberal education by a student will, for the time being at least, be a mere piece of good luck—the coincidence of the students who long for learning meeting with the teachers who know something about the simple old things. As institutions, universities now do a great injustice to human nature.